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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a collection of educational tools for those educators looking for a practical theory of second language acquisition. Educators working with English as a second language (ESL) learners should consider the following factors in trying to develop a working theory: (1) an understanding of what language is, classroom learning, the teaching process, and linguistic contrasts; (2) knowledge and understanding of first language acquisition and all that it entails; (3) awareness of the differences between first language acquisition and second language acquisition; (4) general principles of human intelligence and how it affects or relates to learning, knowledge, awareness, and appreciation of the variation among cognitive styles and personalities of the learners; (5) the importance of culture and learning; and (6) the importance of communicative competence in the learning process. Research indicates that classroom approaches are more successful when they enhance a teacher's knowledge and repertoire rather than try to dramatically alter them. The dynamic process of second language learning requires a working theory that is eclectic and ever-changing in order to meet the needs of the student and capitalize on the strengths of the teacher and promote language learning success. (Contains 20 references.) (KFT)

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Title: Building a 'Working' Theory of Second Language Acquisition: For Classroom and ESL Teachers

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ABSTRACT

As classroom teachers as well as ESL professionals are called upon to meet the needs of second language learners, they are constantly building on background knowledge and theory on a daily basis. For those educators who search for a 'working,' practical theory of second language acquisition, a collection of "educational tools"are offered. Based on several well-known theorists' research, this set of suggestions is meant to provide a catalyst for building the background needed when working with students learning a second language.

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Building a 'Working' Theory of SLA

With the growing number of second language learners entering public schools across the nation, educators are faced with building and rebuilding dynamic theories of second language acquisition. Taking into consideration that the student population itself is ever-changing, the theory—upon which instruction and assessment programs are developed—must reflect the energetic group of students whose language and instructional needs are as diverse as the cultures they represent. The task then must encompass not just one stagnant theory, but must develop into a broad, multi-faceted theory. Using the analogy of a tool box, ESL teachers and regular education teachers must put together a collection of varied ideas, materials, and "tools" from which to choose in order to meet individual and diverse needs of second language learners.

A Collection of Tools

To begin building a theory of second language acquisition, several critical factors must be considered. Brown (2000) cites eight factors suggested by Yorio (1976) many years ago. The factors—although close to twenty years old—still hold importance when working with second language learners. Educators working with ESL learners must consider the following—selected from Yorio's eight factors—in order to develop a working theory of second language acquisition:

1. an understanding of what language is, classroom learning, the teaching process, and linguistic contrasts,
2. knowledge and understanding of first language acquisition and all that it entails,
3. awareness of the differences between first language acquisition and second language acquisition,
4. general principles of human intelligence and how it affects or relates to learning, and knowledge, awareness, and appreciation of the variation among cognitive styles and personalities of learners,
5. the importance of culture and learning, and
6. the importance of communicative competence in the learning process.

The Task of "Theory-building"

An examination of each of these factors is necessary, however all too often ESL teachers and regular classroom teachers are pressed for reading time, let alone research time. In order to begin "theory-building" one must consider current successful practices that are typically part of the everyday classroom environment. Working together, ESL and regular education classroom teachers can assist each other in exploring each of the components. The following description is offered in an attempt to build a theory of second language acquisition.

Factor #1 – Understanding of Language - Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) once stated, "Everything changes if we suppose that individuals learning to read and write already possess a notable knowledge of their mother tongue." Since this is perhaps a beginning point, an understanding of language itself must be developed. Therefore, an

exploration of the question, "What is language and literacy?" begins the task. Merriam-Webster (1995) defines language as:

> 1a. the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a community,
> 1c. a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks...(pg. 654).

If in agreement on these definitions, educators must then look to what language means in the classroom environment. Within the context of typical classrooms and learning environments, language becomes a means for communication in all of its forms—reading, writing, listening, speaking, and ultimately understanding. The experience with communication and interaction a student of any age brings to the learning environment represents already developed models of the world. With regard to building an understanding of language then educators working with second language learners must consider what prior, present, and post-classroom communication experiences the student has been involved with. With this in mind, Clay (1991) suggests that teachers must:

1. create opportunities for learning of all kinds,
2. relate frequently and personally to the student,
3. challenge the student to speak, think, and learn,
4. ask critical questions while listening, and
5. act as a back-up resource and support system, which allows the student to build on prior communication experiences, engage in present, in-class experiences, and extend post-classroom experiences.

In addition, when building an understanding of language and communication, this factor of the second language acquisition theory must consider: a) how learning proceeds – does it move from part to whole or whole to part, b) the nature of lesson structure – learner-centered or teacher-centered, c) the importance of student interests and the degree of relevancy, d) the amount of social interaction within each lesson, and e) the goals of the learner (Freeman & Freeman, 1998). These considerations must be dealt with on an individual basis in order to individualize each situation for each unique learner's needs.

Factor #2 – L1 Acquisition - The second critical factor involves the process of first language acquisition. The variation between theories focusing on this process range from strictly behavioristic and highly structured at one end of the learning spectrum to extremely functional and socially-oriented at the other. To assist in determining which of the L1 acquisition theories may be most appropriate in different situations, Zhang and Alex (1995) point out that above all else, explore the following:

1. What is the teacher's role and what is the student's role in the learning situation at hand?
2. What is the role of language and communication—reading tasks, writing tasks, speaking and listening tasks?
3. What is the relationship between cognitive development, critical thinking, and language learning?

Although the process is natural and most young children learn the rules of language early, it takes time, use, interaction, and exposure to modeling. Even with young learners, however, educators must acknowledge that each child is different which makes

L1 language development not as predictable as one may think. With all of the varied theories of L1 acquisition, many researchers agree that natural language development must be sustained by teachers as they offer print-rich classrooms, value and respect each student's language and communication, encourage continual interaction, and remember that even though students may learn from each other—it's the adults in children's lives that are the main conversationalists and models (Bell, Shultz & Easter, 1997; Genishi, 1988). However, whatever the L1 acquisition approach taken, teachers must understand that a new collection of L1 theories may be built on a day-to-day basis depending on what approach best meets the demands—based on the age of the learner, education, experience, and cognitive level—of the situation.

Factor #3 – L1 and L2 Learning Differences – Several differences within the process of L1 and L2 acquisition have been cited by researchers as critical to learning a second language. Educators must take these differences into consideration when building a theory of second language acquisition. Although many educators have received training in learning theory, minimal attention is given in introductory education classes on language learning. Therefore, if the ESL teacher has limited experience with theories of first language learning, it makes theory-building even more difficult. Critical differences between acquiring L1 and L2 must be considered so that adjustments in the classroom environment as well as the learning situation can be made. For example, when children are first engaging in language exploration in L1, they have unlimited time to explore. This is not the case with second language learners. The situation is immediate and limited. A large amount of formalized activities are not usually necessary in order for a young learner to acquire a first language. Errors are dealt with in a non-threatening

manner. The second language learner, however, requires formal as well as informal activities in order to become language proficient. Errors must be dealt with differently depending on each specific situation. Motivation perhaps illustrates the most acute difference between the two processes because the L1 learner is driven by basic drives to communicate while the L1 learner is driven by the need to survive. In addition, each student will experience a silent period, which in L1 is considered natural. The L2 learner's silent period can often be mistaken for disinterest, a disability, or resistance to the new language and environment. The first principle of the Krashen's Natural Approach (1983) is that comprehension precedes production. The differences as well as similarities between L1 and L2 acquisition play a very important role in building a theory of second language acquisition because once again, each student has different needs that change and are dictated by different tasks.

In addition, teachers must consider their views on bilingual instruction within the ESL or regular education classroom. Pros and cons of bilingual education may greatly influence a second language learning theory for several reasons. First, it has been noted that when young students learn two languages simultaneously there is sometimes a mixing of the two languages at a lexical level. It is imperative that educators recognize this lexical mixing as well as the code-switching that may occur in bilingual educational environments because the situation may require teachers to do the same (Goodz, 1994; McLaughlin, Blanchard, Osanai, 1995). Second, in some cases, young learners may lose skills in L1 as they gain skills in L2. In itself, some may not consider this as detrimental—however—cognitive issues may need to be considered because the abrupt

halt in L1 cognitive development may also be a sign of a type of retarding of general cognitive growth (Wong Fillmore, 1991).

Factor #4 – Variations in Human Intelligence, Personality, and Cognitive Styles – As with any learner, intelligence, personality styles, and cognitive styles must be taken into consideration. The dynamic factor that these variations represent play a big role in any classroom situation. When building a theory of second language acquisition, Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences may be a good starting point in addressing specific needs of students because the M.I. Theory is designed to support the implementation of specific learning goals. Gardner (1997) suggests that a classroom based on MI is never complete, but rather "in formation" or in the process of engaging children—it is a partnership between the learner, the environment, and the teacher. The notion of Multiple Intelligences can assist ESL teaches in creating and implementing a variety of curriculums and assessments to meet the needs of individual learners. There is a wealth of materials readily available for teachers to utilize the theory in many types of classroom configurations and situations. In addition to the MI theory, educators must be aware of cognitive differences as well as personality differences and be ready to accept these differences—many of which may be grounded in specific cultures and traditions.

Factor #5 – The Role and Importance of Culture – Lessow-Hurley (2000) suggests that like language, culture may be invisible to us. We tend to overlook our immediate culture and associate the word, "culture," with far-off, exotic places. Geertz (1992) defines culture as "the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experiences and guild their actions." All students bring their own experiences and backgrounds to the classroom. These experiences may emerge in many forms, which can

ultimately affect learning. Because one's culture is so closely related to success in the school environment, a second language learning theory must consider the following aspects of culture:

1. culture is dynamic, and creative,
2. culture is continuous,
3. culture is learned,
4. culture is shared, and
5. culture is a struggle for survival (Goodenough, 1971).

Although culture is closely related to any type of learning, it is even more connected to language. Chaika (1989) points out that language changes and adapts to meet the needs of its speakers. It would be extremely difficult to separate, discount, or ignore the cultural aspects of learners in any given situation. Because language and culture are intermeshed as a form of social practice (Zoreda, 1997), in the ESL setting and the regular education classroom that serves second language learners, the SLA theory must address the importance of culture and language—which are inseparable.

Factor #6 – Communicative Competence – The last factor in building a theory of SLA encompasses what is known as communicative competence. Communicative competence is that aspect of communicating that enables us to send, receive, interpret, and understanding messages within specific situations and contexts. The notion of communicative competence includes a variety of competences that include grammar, discourse, sociolinguistics, as well as specific language functions. Cummins (1980) suggests that learners may develop two types of proficiency with regard to communicative competence. The first is conversational proficiency—the ability to use

language in face-to-face communication situations. The second is academic proficiency—the ability to carry out school-related literacy and language-based tasks. In addition, the fact that communication may be either context-reduced or context-embedded or a combination of both must be considered when developing activities and learning tasks. A theory of second language acquisition must address the role of communicative competence and all of the issues and components related to this notion because of its importance to second language learners. The part that communicative competence plays in ESL and regular education classrooms becomes vital to the success of students. How this will be addressed and viewed is of utmost importance to any theory of second language acquisition.

Research conducted in the education arena indicates that classroom approaches are more successful when they enhance and expand a teacher's knowledge and repertoire rather than dramatically alter them. Before working with second language learners, ESL educators must develop a framework theory of second language acquisition and learning. However, it is not enough to develop the framework and utilize it. Because of the nature of learning, culture, and learners, the theory must not remain stagnant—but must continue to grow with experience, growing knowledge, and added expertise. The dynamic process of second language learning requires a "working" theory that is eclectic and ever changing in order to meet the needs of students and promote language-learning success.

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